

ANNIVERSARY ANNOUNCE

SUNDAY STAR 14 APRIL 1963

The Total Disaster That Was the Bay of Pigs

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For the waiting, watchful Cuban troops of Prime Minister Fidel Castro, the sudden appearance of the United States warship in the glare of the Cayo Guano light was the final tipoff.

Cayo Guano is at the head of the Bay of Pigs and southeast of Havana.

Obviously, the long awaited invasion was about to begin. Cuban radios began drumming out the alert order in Morse code.

"Place yourself on a work status. Urgent."

And so the invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs by 1,500 armed opponents of Fidel Castro on April 17, 1961—two years ago next Wednesday—was doomed.

The now known facts indicate that it was a failure from the outset.

Assertions of U. S. Betrayal

Bitter survivors of that ill-fated expedition, claiming betrayal by the United States, assert:

A United States Navy aircraft carrier operating under the code name "Santiano" was within 20 miles of the invasion beach with jets and propeller driven fighters aboard painted with the blue identifying stripe of the anti-Castro brigade.

While some of these airplanes were airborne during the critical assault phase, none attacked. Qualified sources in Washington identify this carrier as the USS Boxer.

There was ample, though unused, gunfire support available among the United States warships within sight of the landing beach. These ships—two B-26s, at least one frigate and several destroyers—had escorted the invaders' convoy from Nicaragua to Cuba.

Until the landing craft actually started ashore there had been no final selection of a beach-head area—and no reconnaissance either.

Began in May, 1960

Neither the invaders' mission nor immediate objectives had been defined. They just hoped the United States would straighten things out once they got ashore. The whole business began in earnest in May, 1960. It set in motion a train of events the end of which is not yet in sight—and it was costly.

It cost the lives of 81 of the invaders, not including four American flyers who piloted two B-26 light bombers, and resulted in the wounding of 60.

It cost \$40 million to execute, the then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Lyman Lemnitzer, reportedly told a Senate committee.

It cost upwards of \$53 million to ransom the invasion survivors from Cuban prisons.

It has cost \$75 million to date to support 200,000 Cuban refugees; whose homeland is now closed to them because the invasion failed.

It cost the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which masterminded the operation, a considerable portion of its reputation for competence.

Our Image Tarnished

And it tarnished the image of the United States as a nation of high moral persuasion in the conduct of international affairs.



Members of Castro's militia in action in the Treasure Lagoon zone southeast of Havana on the day of the Bay of Pigs invasion. The photograph came from Cuban government sources.—AP Photo.

coming as it did within a year of the U-2 spy plane affair with the Soviet Union.

Just when the invasion scheme was hatched first is not yet clear, but it apparently began germinating sometime early in 1960 shortly after Mr. Castro began expropriating United States-owned properties in Cuba.

By August 24, 1960, Mr. Castro was claiming that the CIA was organizing adherents of the former Cuban dictator, Fulgencio Batista, in Guatemala for an invasion of Cuba.

And Mr. Castro was at least partially right for the organization had begun in May—six days before the Bay of Pigs invasion.

These reports—later confirmed—said anti-Castro refugees were training in Guatemala; paratroopers and pilots at the 5,000-foot-long airstrip at Retalhuleu; infantry at Trux, La Piedad and Gerrenpachango.

During January, 1961, unheeded night flights from long-range bombers were making a series of reconnaissance flights over the operation was intended primarily as a guerrilla reinforcement.

Mr. Eisenhower said that

members of the Alabama National Guard, all former pilots of the World War II light bomber, the B-26, were recruited.

These men were paid \$2,500 a month each, plus \$200 monthly for expenses, so their survivors reported.

In all, apparently, about 21 pilots were hired to train Cubans. Gov. Orval Faubus of Arkansas disclosed just this year that most came out of his State's Air National Guard.

The Man Who Hired Pilots

The Alabama flyers were hired by a man who identified himself as Alex R. Carlson of the Double Check Corp. of 1945 Curtis parkway, Miami Springs, Fla.

Double Check was formed May 12, 1959 by Mr. Carlson with a capital of \$500 to engage in a wide variety of business activities.

After the invasion Mr. Carlson said he was simply acting as an employment agency for an unnamed Latin-American concern.

While the United States pilots were taking their Cuban counterparts in tow, the infantry was being trained under the over-all direction of a man identified by the refugees as a Filipino who went by the name of Col. Valerio.

There were American officers, too, men known by the cover names of "Frank," "Jimmy" and "Charles."

From May, 1960, to November, the anti-Castro Cubans were given guerrilla training. In November the training was shifted to straight World War II infantry tactics.

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when he left office January 20, 1961, no firm plan for the employment of the refugee Cuban force had been determined.

Castro Knew It Was Coming

This fact goes to the heart of the mission, what the invaders were supposed to accomplish and how.

Guerrillas would need neither air cover nor tanks, trucks nor jeeps. Regular troops for a stand-up battle with Mr. Castro would, and the preliminaries began.

On April 2, bombs exploded in the Cuban Army's magazine publishing plant and in a government-owned soft-drink plant.

April 5: Fire destroyed a sugar warehouse.

April 7: Dr. Jose Miró Cardona, head of the Cuban Revolutionary Council in Miami, predicted a Cuban uprising.

April 8: A large water main was blown up and sections of Havana were left waterless for 48 hours.

April 10: Mr. Castro abruptly clamped a radio blackout on all invasion area talk.

April 12: A bomb exploded in the Havana railway station, injuring no one.

April 13: Fire destroyed a pepper warehouse and a department store.

April 15: Mr. Castro conveyed 45,000 heavily armed troops to the Bay of Pigs.

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operations none was directed toward military objectives—roads, bridges, fuel and ammunition dumps, airfields or motorized equipment.

On April 15, three rocket-firing B-26s struck at three Cuban air bases, two just outside Havana and the third at Santiago de Cuba.

The planes were to have knocked out Castro's air force, consisting of United States-made T-33 jet trainers, British Seaquits and B-26 bombers.

They failed, but there was no follow-up air strike on April 16—and no news either.

Now it was April 17. All day Havana Radio played soothing music, interspersed with soap operas and a lecture on how young lovers should behave.

From time to time, however, the programs were interrupted by urgent orders for all militia to report to their duty stations.

Radio Silent on Invasion

Throughout April 18 Havana Radio was conspicuously silent on the subject of the invasion though the previous night it had appealed for blood donors.

Diplomats and correspondents from Iron Curtain countries reported on April 19 that Cuba had been attacked by planes and troop-carrying ships.

On April 18 we received a radio diagram from the American aircraft carrier "Santiano," telling us that at 3:30 p.m. that day we would get air support from six F-41 planes (World War II fighters).

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Castro's sentiments. In Havana alone some 200,000 were rounded up and stuffed into any place with a wall around it.

Any possible sympathy uprising was thus crushed at the outset. What had happened?

On April 10-11, U.S. brigade had sailed from Puerto Cabezas on Great Corn Island, Nicaragua, a tiny port to which they had been ferried from Guatemala.

Guatemala could not assert truthfully that the invasion had not been staged from her soil.

"Duque de Darias," 48, once wealthy Cuban businessman and a coffee expert, was chief officer of the Rio Escondido, one of the ships in the invasion force.

In an interview in Miami, Mr. Darias said:

"We left Puerto Cabezas on April 12. Five Liberty-type transport vessels, the Rio Escondido, Atlantico, Caribe, Houston and Lake Charles, were the only ships in the invasion force. The Lake Charles was the command ship. It was the only ship to land late for mop-up operations."

Two Small Boats

"Aboard the transports were two small boats, the Hissard with 14 machine guns and the Barbara J. with nine. These were small converted coasters."

"Seven landing craft were present for the invasion—three LCVPs (landing craft, utility) and four LCVPs (landing craft, vehicle personnel). Also 30 outboard motor communication launches, six aboard each (Liberty) ship. Also five tanks."

The landing craft with the tanks aboard were escorted to a point near the Cuban coast by an American-type ship. I only saw its silhouette. This was the evening of April 16.

"We could see the lights of Cayo Guano. There, at what was called our convoy point, an American-type ship was visible in the tower light."

"Why that spot in front of the tower was selected for the cruiser, I don't know. Nor do I know why the general site was selected for the invasion."

"It was not until about four in the morning that a landing plane was found. It was difficult for there was a violent sea."

Enemy Prepared

"But by the time the small landing beach was decided upon, the enemy had time to get ready for us. I don't know why the beach was not selected beforehand."

"The Houston went in first. It was followed by artillery fire directed from the Bay of Pigs airfield. There was a cross fire which was vicious."

"The Houston with the communications gear aboard was the ship that was sunk in five minutes. . . . When disintegration began it was under an aerial battle between our planes and Fidel's."

"Then fighters hit the wooden bridges of the Rio Escondido. Our ship blew up and sank in five minutes. . . . We swam to the Blagar."

On April 18 we received a radio diagram from the American aircraft carrier "Santiano," telling us that at 3:30 p.m. that day we would get air support from six F-41 planes (World War II fighters).

"At 2:30 we saw two planes cross. A minute later two others crossed. A third plane immediately followed. . . . The planes followed. . . . From that moment we knew the war was lost for us and that

we had been the victims of a great betrayal.

"We had five planes. It took them three hours to fly from Puerto Cabezas. They would fight for about three quarters of an hour and then fly back for supplies. Then they would come back. It was most galling. I had a friend, Joaquin Varela, who went 46 hours without sleep."

Paratroopers Take Airstrip

"On April 19 when the Cuban pilots were played out, four Americans stepped in to relieve some of them. The Americans in two B-26s were the ones from Alabama who were shot down. They were killed."

Were the Cuban invaders ever promised air cover? Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, brother to the President, said in a magazine interview this year that at no time had the United States ever promised military air support.

"The key word is 'military,' that is, uniformed pilots in United States marked planes."

Dr. Enrique Llaena, one of those captured and ransomed, said:

"We were told there would be air cover. Not officially. But it might as well have been official. We all knew the United States had a hand in the matter. We were transported to the training area in United States planes. We were trained by Americans. Our weapons and planes were American. What else could our country expect? We were not Americans. No one wanted to commit suicide."

Straight-Ahead Attack

The invading troops were landed on Girón Beach, which is approached by land via a single road, flanked on both sides by impassable marshes and mangrove swamps. There was only one way to attack and that was straight ahead into Mr. Castro's 45,000 men.

Of the 16 planes in anti-Castro operation, eight were shot down and the remainder arrived back in Nicaragua full of holes.

Mr. Llaena reported that the invaders managed only to progress from the beachhead to a road junction designated as "Central Australia." This was 10 to 12 miles inland.

That was that. It was a total disaster.

On April 24, White House Press secretary Pierre Salinger read Washington newsmen a statement in which President Kennedy accepted "... full responsibility for the events of the past few days."

On June 28, 1961, Mr. Kennedy told a news conference he was considering changes in the intelligence setup. Some revisions were later made though how extensive they were is unknown.

Since the invasion, the CIA has retired. Allen Dulles, director of the CIA at the time, has retired. Allen Dulles, director of the CIA at the time, has retired. Allen Dulles, director of the CIA at the time, has retired.

It was a gradual process spread over a year. There was no hint that the invasion was a disaster. . . . From that moment we knew the war was lost for us and that

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